

by Adam Szymczyk

David Schutter's series *SK L 402-429, 432-439* (2017), aka the Liebermann Suite or Liebermann Drawings, consists of thirty-six drawings that address, indirectly, the group of works by Max Liebermann (1847–1935) discovered in the so-called Gurlitt Estate. This trove of artworks was hoarded by the German art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt (1895–1956), who was commissioned by the Nazis to buy and sell art in occupied Europe for hard currency and to the benefit of the German Reich. Gurlitt had been known as an avid supporter and connoisseur of German avant-garde art and had a short career as a rather brilliant museum director in Germany. In his new role as dealer, Gurlitt traded the works of art that had been deemed “degenerate”—works that he had shown in exhibitions before he was ushered into changing sides in the mid-1930s.

Following Gurlitt's death in a car accident more than a decade after the end of the Third Reich, his reclusive son Cornelius continued to live with the inherited estate in his home in Schwabing, a district of Munich, keeping a low profile and never showing the works to anyone. Their existence was soon forgotten and remained so for nearly sixty years. After the collection was rediscovered during a search of Cornelius Gurlitt's apartment by German police on February 28, 2012, the public prosecutor seized it for further investigation.

A long period of wheeling and dealing ensued that involved the German state in a leading role, the remaining members of the Gurlitt family as challengers of the state hoping to keep the works, as well as museum professionals, art historians, lawyers, and journalists as bystanders and commentators. Despite the protracted provenance research organized under the personal aegis of Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, only a few works were restituted to the heirs of Jewish collectors who had been forced to sell them below market value or give away their possessions under duress during the Nazi era. Finally, a great majority of the works was handed over to Kunstmuseum Bern, following Gurlitt's last will, produced shortly before he passed away in hospital on May 6, 2014—with an early Claude Monet pastel drawing tucked away in a briefcase next to his deathbed.

The idea of letting go of troublesome baggage by making it radically public rather than allowing the Gurlitt Estate to remain inaccessible and frozen in the nexus of state-administered rigor mortis, informed my proposal to exhibit the entire estate as part of documenta 14 in Kassel. My appointment as artistic director in November 2013 coincided with the German press breaking the news about the “Gurlitt treasure” held in obscurity by federal authorities since its state-orchestrated “discovery” in February 2012. I intended to show the entire trove as an impenetrable block on archive shelves installed in the central space of Neue Galerie, one of documenta 14's principal venues in Kassel. Due to the legal circumstances and German politicians' clearly expressed refusal to even temporarily renounce their control over the interpretation of history by allowing a public display and discussion of the hoarded

artworks in a major contemporary art exhibition, this idea proved impossible to realize.

The absence of the Gurlitt Estate at documenta 14 prompted responses from some of the artists participating in the exhibition. David Schutter's suite constitutes an attempt to reach out toward Liebermann's works in the Gurlitt Estate. The originals, held in the prosecutor's custody, had not been made available for Schutter's study when he began his work on the series. He approached them from a distance, through a sequence of equivocations and acts of mimicry, which included a collaboration with a German paper master to recreate (or, in Schutter's formulation, to *reanimate*, to bring to life again) the chamois-colored paper used by Liebermann for Schutter's own work. In the same conversation, Schutter explained his decision to engage with Liebermann's drawings by pointing to their generic character as portraits of German normality: "The Liebermann drawings in the trove are sketches of daily life in middle-class Germany. Dashed down on small scraps of paper, one finds scenes of street life, taverns, theater performances, boating excursions, and countryside retreats. I came to see these normative tableaux as a perversion of sorts within the Gurlitt context."¹

That context was the pervasive normalcy of the Nazi administrative machinery, which, in 1938, involved establishing the Commission for the Exploitation of Confiscated Products of Degenerate Art (Kommission zur Verwertung der eingezogenen Produkte entarteter Kunst) and the public burning of more than five thousand works of art—those works which Gurlitt and his dealer colleagues had problems selling—in the courtyard of the Old Fire Station (Alte Feuerwache) in Berlin on March 20, 1939. Works such as Liebermann's sketches might have ended up among those consumed by flames, however, Gurlitt, in his disinterested connoisseurship, evidently saved them for later use.

There is something particularly terrifying about the immediacy and hesitation present in a sketch, its fundamentally open-ended form, being terminated by fire. And yet "manuscripts don't burn," so lost works of art will keep returning to haunt us. The work of David Schutter offers a possibility to overcome the normative, institutional protocols of forgetting through a tentative rendition of what stands in for whatever cannot be seen or told.² Uncertainty is a prerequisite for any attempt to find truth. In Schutter's drawn examinations of Liebermann's studies, this uncertainty assumes indefinite shapes. And so the study continues.

1
In: "Keeper of the Art That Kept Him: David Schutter in Conversation with Dieter Roelstraete," <https://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/21168/keeper-of-the-art-that-kept-him>, accessed online on August 12, 2019.

2
See: Monika Szewczyk, "Rendition," exhibition essay published in a foldout poster accompanying the eponymous exhibition of David Schutter curated by Monika Szewczyk at Logan Center Exhibitions, The David and Reva Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago, 2013.

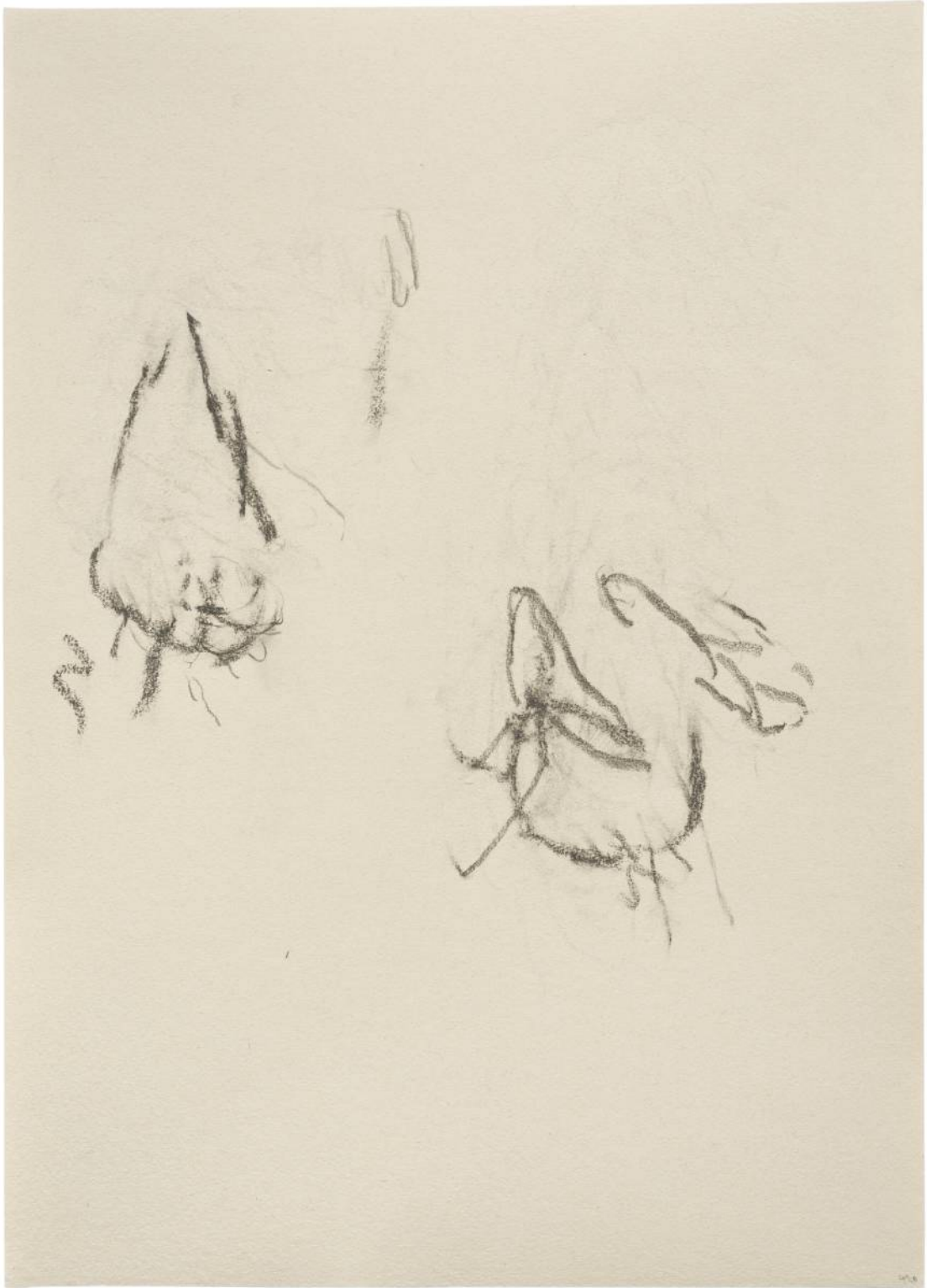


This page through page 259 David Schutter.
SKL 405 (p. 91); *SK L 409* (p. 92); *SK L 410*
(p. 93); *SK L 418* (p. 94); *SK L 420* (p. 95); *SK*
L 421 (p. 96); *SK L 427* (p. 97); *SK L 429* (p. 98);
SK L 434 (p. 99) from *SK L 402-429, 432-439*,
nine of thirty-six drawings in black chalk and
pencil on chamois-colored paper, 16 1/2 x 11 5/8
inches, 2017. Photo Credit: James Prinz



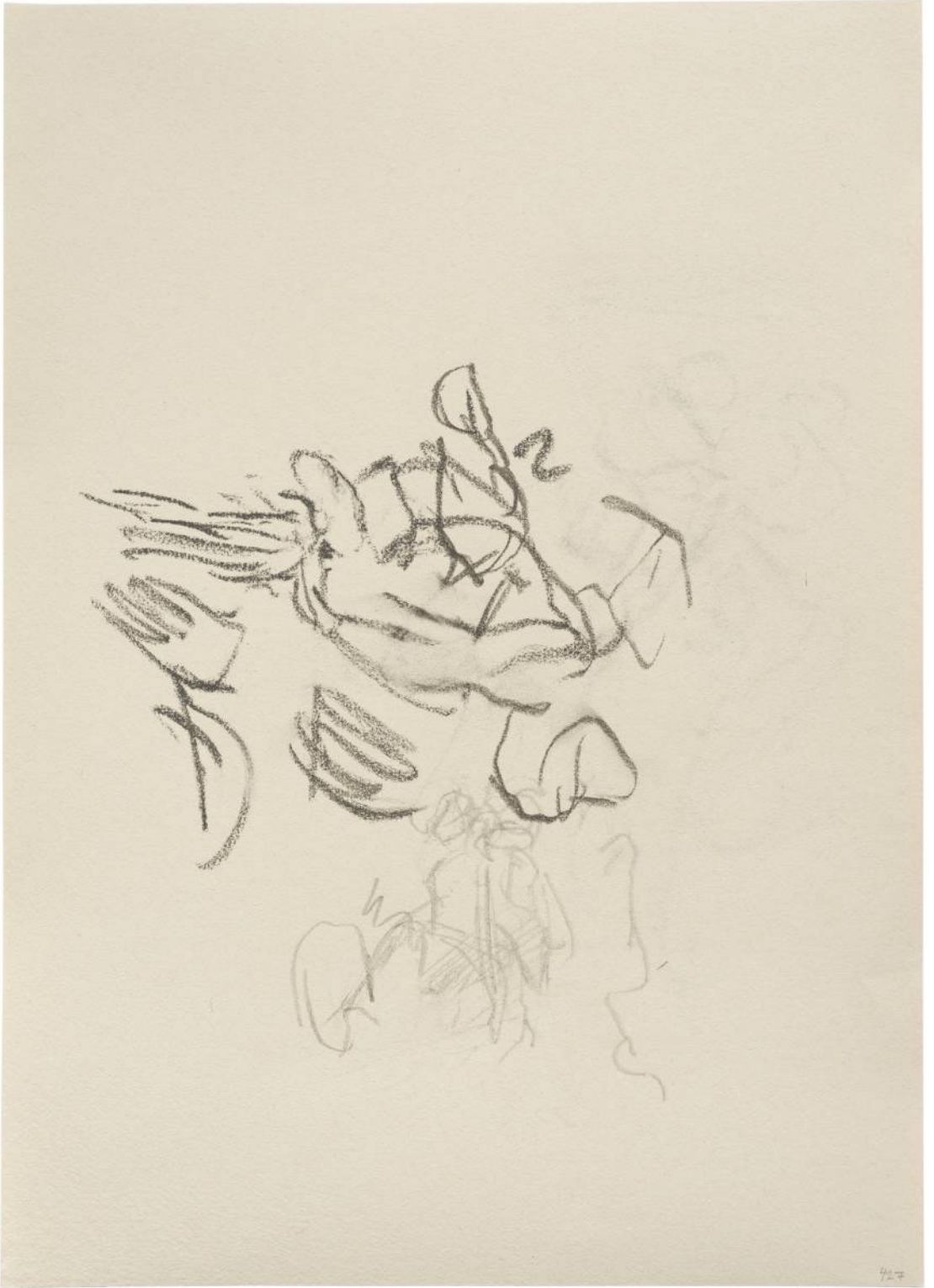








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Previous spread Installation view of David Schutter, *SK L 402-429, 432-439*, documenta 14, Neue Galerie, Kassel, 2017, thirty-six drawings in black chalk and pencil on chamois colored paper, 16 1/2 x 11 5/8 inches each sheet